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ABSTRACT

The ecological perspective holds that community and school activities are a rare product of interaction among adolescents, communities, families, and schools. This study was designed to assess the outcomes of a personal empowerment program. The sample consisted of 25 male and 27 female ninth grade students. Students took a pretest and received a total activities score which represented the degree to which they were involved in organized activities at school and in their communities. Subjects were selected from the middle range of activity participation and then randomly assigned to the experimental or control group. Nineteen students completed a 1-week summer workshop on personal empowerment with follow-up sessions during the school year. The summer workshop consisted of small and large group activities focused on leadership, communications, assertiveness, stress management, and decision-making. Students took a posttest 6 months following the week-long workshop. Results indicated that the effect of the personal empowerment program was to maintain the experimental group's level of activity participation while the control group decreased its level of participation. No significant differences were found at posttest for locus of control or self-esteem. The value of the findings in general is that participation in activities, at least by adolescents with moderate activity involvement, can be affected, even through a fairly simple and short intervention. (ABL)

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Evaluation Of The Effects Of A Personal Empowerment Program For Adolescents

by

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper we describe and report our evaluation of a personal empowerment program for adolescents. The program is the first phase of a longitudinal study, employing an ecological perspective, of the participation of high school students in community and school activities. The larger longitudinal study seeks to explore the role in such activities of adolescents, communities, families, and schools, to examine strategies to increase participation, and to evaluate the effects of participation on adolescents.

An ecological perspective holds that community and school activities are a product of interaction between adolescents, communities, families, and schools. Every community, family, and school communicates to its adolescents through a series of distinctive yet sometimes overlapping channels. They organize a socialization system through which the adolescents learn the cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social skills and understandings which define adulthood in that community (Ianni, 1989). Community and school activities are one of the channels of communication to youth. Relative access to, support of, and variety are examples of variables which might be used to judge the importance of activities within a community, school, or family. Earls, Beardslee, and Garrison (1987) and Edwards and Kelly (1980) claim that the socialization in communities, families, and schools may be more important than personal attributes as the primary determinant of competence in individuals.

In developmental psychology adolescence is viewed as a time of experimenting to learn more about one's self in relation to others, and of forming an identity as an adult. Most adolescents will develop more fully, and in healthier ways, if they are encouraged to do their experimenting within the context of supportive, yet challenging environments. They need access to a variety of activities in their schools, communities, and families. If activities are available, they need to recognize that they have something to gain, and something to give, by their involvement (Konopka, 1973).

Of particular concern in this new decade is how communities and schools in the 1980's have decreased their commitments of money and time to these "extra-curricular" activities (Medrich, 1982). All too often the options available to most adolescents, especially those who are not oriented to sports, are watching television, hanging out at the malls, drug and sexual experimentation, and association with peer gangs. To justify the time and cost of more structured options, programs must be evaluated to determine their effectiveness.

This study was designed to assess the outcomes of a personal empowerment program whose goals are to enhance leadership information, attitudes, and skills and to increase participation in community and school activities of ninth grade students who have moderate rates of participation in activities. Leadership is defined as the ability to influence the actions of others. It is a cluster of attitudes and skills that can be learned and practiced. The ability to cause others to follow a common goal is one sure way of recognizing leadership. It is not the only, however. Two basic tenets of the personal empowerment program are that all adolescents have the ability

to lead and adolescents demonstrate leadership daily across a range of community, school, and family activities.

The program includes an intensive one-week summer workshop followed by a series of five, two-hour follow-up sessions during the school year. The summer workshop consists of small and large group activities focused on leadership, communications, assertiveness, stress management, and decision-making. Throughout the workshop it is emphasized that adolescents can practice and enhance these skills in community, school and family activities. The school year follow-up sessions focus on skill review and support of involvement in community and school activities.

A previous evaluation of the empowerment program showed students increased their leadership information, held more positive attitudes toward their leadership abilities, and reported increased leadership behaviors in community, school, and family situations (Fertman & Long, In Press). The possible effects of the program on students' participation in community and school activities, however, was not studied in the previous evaluation.

The research on activity participation as it relates to such variables as grades or school attendance has been informative, but also has been limiting in two ways. First, the research has been correlational since students select themselves into activities. Second, most research has focused on sports activities (Holland and Andre, 1987). The current study used a pretest-posttest control group design to allow statements about the effects of the program on three variables: participation levels in community and school activities, self-esteem, and locus of control. The personality variables of self-esteem and locus of control were selected because of

their importance to one's sense of personal empowerment, and standardized methods of administering and scoring the instruments were available.

METHOD

Sample

The sample consisted of 52 ninth grade students (25 males, 27 females) from a school district which includes a small working class town, a middle class suburban area, and rural farm acreage. The majority of the students in this sample and within this community are white; the mean age at the pretest was 14.5 years. At the time of the pretest, students were at the highest grade level in the junior high school (9th grade); at the time of the posttest students were in the lowest grade level in the senior high school (10th grade).

Procedure

All ninth grade students in the school district took the pretest and received a total activities score which represented the degree to which they were involved in organized activities, at school and in their communities. The subjects for this study were then randomly selected from the middle range of activity participation and randomly assigned to the experimental or control group.

The 26 students in the experimental group were invited to participate in the empowerment program. Twenty-two students agreed to attend; nineteen completed the summer week-long workshop. The seven students who chose not to participate or who dropped out before completing the workshop were part of the control group. They did not appear to differ from the students who completed the workshop.

At the time of the posttest, two follow-up sessions had been held at the high school. The posttest was given nine months after the pretest and six months after the week-long summer workshop.

Instruments

The degree of involvement in community and school activities was assessed using an Activity Survey adapted from Steitz and Owen (1988), Willits and Willits (1986), and Edwards and Kelly (1980). The Activity Survey is a four section open-ended listing of activities. The sections include: 1) community organizations and church groups, 2) school clubs and organizations, excluding sports, 3) private lessons and courses, and 4) school sports. Students receive 1 point for each activity listed and 0, 1, or 2 points for degree of involvement for activities in the first two sections.

Self-esteem was assessed using the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale. For each of the ten scale items there are four possible responses to each item: strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. Response ratings for each student are summed for a total self-esteem score for each student. The scores can range from 10 (indicating low self-esteem) to 40 (indicating high self-esteem).

Locus of control was assessed using the Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale for Children (Nowicki & Strickland, 1973), a forty item scale for measuring the degree to which a person believes that reinforcement is a result of their own behavior (internal) or a result of fate or chance (external). The student responds with a "yes" or "no" to each of the items and receives one point for each external response. Scores range from 0 (completely internal locus of control) to 40 (completely external locus of control).

RESULTS

A series of analyses of covariance were used to analyze the results thus taking into account any initial differences in scores between the two groups. A multivariate analysis was not used since the personality variables, locus of control and self-esteem, are not expected to change at the same rate as the behavioral variable, activity involvement. The pretest score for each variable was used as the covariate. Table 1 shows the analysis of covariance for each variable.

An analysis of covariance using the pretest activity score as the covariate found that the adjusted posttest mean of the group that participated in the program was significantly different from the adjusted posttest mean of the control group when alpha was set at .05.

An analysis of covariance using the pretest self-esteem score as the covariate found that the adjusted posttest mean for the group that participated in the program was not significantly different from the adjusted posttest mean of the control group when alpha was set at .05.

An analysis of covariance using the pretest locus of control score as the covariate found that the adjusted posttest mean of the group that participated in the program was not significantly different from the adjusted posttest mean of the control group when alpha was set at .05.

Insert Table 1

Three findings that also appeared when the data were examined deserve comment and are shown in Tables 2 and 3. First, the unadjusted posttest mean of the activity score of the experimental group did not increase greatly from the actual pretest mean but there was a notable decrease in the unadjusted posttest mean of the activity score of the control group. The initial expectation had been that the experimental group's activity participation would increase and the control's group activity participation would remain constant.

Insert Table 2

Second, although the adjusted posttest means of the two groups were not significantly different on the locus of control measure, the actual mean of the control group became more external while the actual mean of the experimental group moved in the internal direction.

Third, the correlations between the covariates and the dependent variables differed as shown in Table 3. For the activities scores, the average correlation between pretest and posttest was .198. In this case there was actually a reduced likelihood of finding significant results with the analysis of covariance. The average

correlations between the pretest and posttest scores for the locus of control and self-esteem measures were .606 and .781, respectively.

Insert Table 3

DISCUSSION

The effect of the personal empowerment program, six months following the week-long workshop, was to maintain the experimental group's level of activity participation while the control group decreased its level of participation. Although a significant difference between the adjusted means of the two groups was found using an analysis of covariance, by observing the actual means it was found that this was not due to an increase in the participants' activity scores but due to a decrease in the activity scores of the control group. It appears the program helped to maintain students' involvement in activities at a time when adolescents may disengage from their activities, probably associated in this case with the transition from junior to senior high (Simmons & Blyth, 1987).

There are several possible explanations for how the personal empowerment program prevented the decline in involvement. The content of the workshop specifically addresses student involvement in community, family, and school

activities. The workshop took place at the end of July, a point at which the students had disconnected from the junior high and were preparing to move to the senior high. The workshop might have provided a bridge between the two schools and reduced some of the stress and anxiety about the move. The junior and senior high schools' personnel were involved at various times during the program implementation, though only minimally with the students. The principal of the senior high school, for example, attended the luncheon on the last day of the workshop which gives the students an opportunity to be recognized for their participation. His presence might have conveyed to these students that despite their starting at the bottom of the social hierarchy at high school they were valued members of the school. Also, an attempt was made to solicit parental support. When parents consented to allow their child to participate in the program, an informational brochure was provided and questions and concerns answered. Furthermore, at the time of the posttest students had already participated in two follow-up sessions and were scheduled to complete three more. These sessions are designed to encourage and to support activity participation.

No attempt was made to analyze the effects of these individual actions. In fact, they are viewed as part of the treatment. Future researchers may be interested in looking at the smaller components of this or similar programs to assess their specific contribution to the outcomes.

No significant differences were found in the adjusted posttest means for locus of control or self-esteem. The actual means show that the experimental group did move toward more internal locus of control, while the control group moved toward

more external locus of control. Previous research has shown a tendency for the locus of control to become more internal over time with occasional shifts to the external direction (Johnson, 1976). One possible explanation for the movement in different directions of these two groups is the control group may have felt a loss of control as they moved on to high school while the experimental group may have felt more in control of their situations as a result of the program.

Self-esteem remained stable during the nine months and does not appear to be readily influenced by short, psycho-educational interventions such as this program, at least among adolescents who can be defined as average students in relation to participation levels in community and school activities. Required may be larger, more concerted efforts such as those being implemented in California as part of a collaborative program of government, business, community, school, and family organizations (California State Department of Education, 1990).

The value of the findings in general is that participation in activities, at least by adolescents with moderate activity involvement, can be affected, even through a fairly simple and short intervention. We can only speculate as to the effects of communities, schools, and families over long periods of time on adolescents' participation in activities.

Likewise, the findings point out that activity levels of adolescents who are even moderately involved can fluctuate and highlights the need for ongoing efforts to maintain involvement. One reason for wanting to maintain adolescents' involvement is that activities are a means for adolescents to learn and practice the skills they need as adults (Ianni, 1989). At times of low involvement adolescents may

be more prone to disengage from their community, school, and family, particularly if these times coincide with stresses and changes beyond the adolescents' control (Shoemaker, 1984, Hireshi, 1969).

The findings also raise questions about adolescents with low rates of participation. If the adolescents with moderate participation rates decreased their involvement during the transition from junior high to senior high, it might be that low participators also decrease participation. Potentially it would seem that such adolescents could become completely disconnected from all their community, school, and family activities. As part of the larger longitudinal study it might be warranted to investigate the natural course of activity participation for adolescents with different rates of involvement (high, moderate, and low) and the effects of participation on each, so as to strengthen future interventions designed to increase participation rates.

The data indicate that the program did not increase the activity participation of the students but helped them maintain participation during a time in which participation rates drop. While it can be argued that maintenance of involvement during the transition from junior high to senior high is an accomplishment, questions are raised about what modification in the program could lead to increased participation levels. Likewise, if the program was only able to help maintain participation of moderate participators, what might be needed to increase participation of students with low activity involvement rates.

Additional information is needed on how the treatment group actually went about maintaining their participation levels. The data has yet to be analyzed to

determine if they elected a particular subset of activities (e.g., sports, school clubs, community groups) or if they were involved in a variety of activities. Likewise, was there some aspect or characteristic of the activities in which they participated which encouraged and supported involvement? In general, as part of the larger longitudinal study, it would be helpful to also investigate recruitment, retention, and recognition strategies of activities to fully answer these questions. One of the limitations of this study was that students were clearly invited to participate in the program. The effect of being invited is unknown. Another limitation is that the program explicitly addressed activity participation. It is possible that these students were better able to complete the activity survey due to the program.

This study has established baseline data upon which to build and from which students' participation in activities can and will be tracked. These students will be assessed on these three variables, and other variables, for at least another year. The study will be replicated with this year's ninth grade class.

Finally the study is the beginning of a more thorough analysis of the role of activities in adolescent development. Unless adolescents are provided with opportunities to be involved in activities and supported in the participation, they will meet their needs for experimentation in other, less healthy, ways. Programs such as the personal empowerment program and community and school activities provide constructive options.

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TABLE 1 Analysis of covariance for activity score, locus of control, and self-esteem.

1. Activity Score:

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Tail Prob.
Group	54.689	1	54.689	4.21	0.0456*
Activity Score	14.174	1	14.174	1.09	0.3015
Error	636.900	49	12.998		

2. Locus of Control:

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Tail Prob.
Group	71.727	1	71.727	3.52	0.0665
Locus of Control	541.469	1	541.469	26.60	0.0000
Error	997.449	49	20.356		

3. Self-Esteem:

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Tail Prob.
Group	0.116	1	0.116	0.01	0.9199
Self Esteem	1030.011	1	1030.011	90.64	0.0000
Error	556.821	49	11.363		

* $p < .05$

TABLE 2. Means, adjusted means, and standard deviations of the three dependent variables.

	Experimental Group (n=19)		Control Group (n=33)	
	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
Activity Score	x= 6.3	unadj x= 6.3 adj x= 6.2	x = 5.3	unadj x=4.0 adj x=4.0
	sd= 2.5	sd= 3.7	sd= 3.0	sd=3.5
Self-esteem	x= 29.9	unadj x= 29.3 adj x= 29.1	x= 29.5	unadj x= 28.9 adj x= 29.0
	sd= 6.6	sd= 5.7	sd= 6.2	sd= 5.6
Locus of control	x= 15.2	unadj x= 12.5 adj x= 11.5	x= 12.8	unadj x= 13.5 adj x= 14.0
	sd= 6.2	sd= 5.7	sd= 4.4	sd= 5.5

TABLE 3. **Pearson correlations between the pretest - posttest scores of the three dependent variables.**

	Experimental Group (n=19)	Control Group (n=33)
Activity Score	r= 0.345	r= 0.051
	average r= 0.198	
Self-esteem	r= 0.703	r= 0.858
	average r= 0.781	
Locus of control	r= 0.659	r=0.552
	average r= 0.606	